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The Romantic Kennedy

ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS TIMES. *By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. 1,066 pages. Houghton Mifflin. $19.95.*

Prowling about the literary precincts, I find concern expressed for the legitimacy of Arthur Schlesinger's balancing act. How, the argument goes, can a professional historian do his disinterested duty by events in which he was involved as a partisan political activist? Did not Ethel Kennedy give him access to her husband's papers on the assumption that an admiring biography would follow? Such misgiving is naïve. Apart from the quaint notion that any biography is objective, there's ample precedent for his performance. Think of Einhard, Charlemagne's confidant and biographer; of Thomas More, who prospered while he lent his scholarship to Henry's cause; of Milton, hired by Cromwell for his talent as a publicist. Surely Schlesinger's bias, freely admitted in his foreword, is more than offset by the value of his intimacy with his subject, and the mass of material made available only to him.

Troubling: Nevertheless, this vast and uncommonly fascinating book is clearly intended to be in part a brief for the defense. Schlesinger knows well that certain aspects of Robert Kennedy's character and career remain, ten years after his death, troubling to many; these he explores, offering plausible reasons to suppose that Kennedy at all times acted for the best as he understood it—although, as I will argue in a moment, that best was occasionally, sometimes critically, inadequate.

Early in life, he acquired a reputation for ruthlessness. "Kind of a nasty, brutal, humorless little fellow," a Harvard classmate said; even his father thought him "tough as a bootheel." Jimmy Hoffa called him "that little monster," and Lyndon Johnson "that grand-standing little runt." Schlesinger suggests that Robert, the shyest, most religious and least articulate of the Kennedy sons, expressed his vulnerability through moodiness and harshness, though behind the combativeness a gentleness and depth of feeling lurked. His tough image could be ford to be a son of a bitch when the candidate could not—but the contrast between the brothers' styles was often remarked upon to Robert's disadvantage. John Kennedy, intellectual, urbane and analytical, seemed to live by his head; Robert, emotional, committed and intense, seemed to live by his gut. "John Kennedy," Schlesinger writes, "was a realist brilliantly disguised as a romantic; Robert Kennedy, a romantic stubbornly disguised as a realist."

The younger Kennedy behaved decently in situations that made monsters of lesser men. He did not, as his critics suggest, help Joe McCarthy root about for Communists, but while working for McCarthy's subcommittee inquired into the trade conducted by America's allies with Communist China. Unlike the renegade Senator, he got his facts right and accused no one of treason. He did not want to be Attorney General (Abe Ribicoff was the President's first choice), and took the job only when his brother insisted he needed a reliable confidant. While at the Justice Department, he pressed his investigations of Hoffa, driven by a conviction of righteousness and an anger at the labor racketeer's betrayal of the courageous workers in his union, and he pressed J. Edgar Hoover, who didn't care to be subordinated to the President's brother, to investigate organized crime (the two men Hoover most hated, said an FBI executive, "were Martin Luther King second and Robert Kennedy first").

Distrust: Schlesinger concludes that Robert Kennedy did not know the FBI had put bugs in mobsters' homes, though Hoover said he knew and perhaps thought he did know; at the time Kennedy cared more for fighting crime than for civil liberties and perhaps preferred not to know. He did, however, authorize the taps on Martin Luther King's telephones, hoping thereby to prove that King was not, as the FBI insisted, in league with Communists. By the time of his involvement with the civil-rights workers in the South, he had come to distrust the temptation of the Federal government to seek more power; a stronger government, he said, could have accomplished more, but a balance would have been lost: "I think that it comes back to haunt you at a later time."

The portrait that emerges here is one of an intelligent, tough young man, an aggressive politician who became educated in sensitivity, who developed a capacity for reflection and grief, and who served (perhaps to everyone's surprise) as a restraining force in government. True, Robert Kennedy plotted the overthrow of Fidel Castro, but there is no evidence that either Kennedy knew of the CIA's daffy plans to murder him, and, according to Schlesinger, it is unlikely that Castro was involved in the President's assassination.

John Kennedy, impatient with his State Department and mistrustful of the CIA, came to think that his brother was wasted at Justice and should have been head of the CIA. Had he been, the Bay of Pigs debacle might have been avoided. Robert, a dove in the Cuban missile crisis (he thought Dean Rusk "had a virtually complete breakdown mentally and physically"), was probably responsible for turning the American reaction away from a military strike at Cuba and toward the blockade that resulted in a Russian retreat.

In the matter of the Vietnam war, he reversed himself twice. In 1951, he thought America should not get involved; in 1962, he said, "We are going to win in Vietnam. We will remain here until we do win"; by the time of Johnson's escalations, he had come to see the war not as an abstraction, as most of those in government did, but as individuals in pain. Although he was committed to ending the slaughter and had by then become a charismatic hero to great numbers of the American poor and disenfranchised, he held back from the primaries in 1968 because he believed that if he were the first to challenge the President, "people would say I was splitting the party out of ambition and envy." The image of the ruthless opportunist proved unshakable, never more so than when he followed Eugene McCarthy into the primaries, although, as Schlesinger observes, McCarthy's "concern about the war . . . had come distinctly later than Kennedy's."

Such hesitancy in the cause of decorous party solidarity was not unique. To their shame, the Kennedy brothers appointed racist Southern judges to the Federal bench on the ground that by opposing them they would incur the wrath of Southern congressmen who controlled the committees through which all Kennedy legislation must pass. John Kennedy declined to pull out of Vietnam while he could for fear that withdrawal would precipitate his political collapse, and that worse (he meant Goldwater) would follow. Schlesinger tells us that John Kennedy's failure lay in the "hopelessly divided legacy" he left on Vietnam. I think he is mistaken. Surely the Kennedys' failure, a tragedy often repeated in history, lay in their assumption that time was on their side, that they, being the good guys, could afford to act shabbily, to do less than their best, just to